

REITER'S DISEASE*

BY

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Reiter's disease is characterized by non-gonococcal purulent urethritis followed in 2 to 14 days by arthritis and conjunctivitis. The arthritis is very painful, and is punctuated by remissions and exacerbations. The knees, the great toe joints, and the interphalangeal joints are affected most often, but other joints are frequently involved. The conjunctivitis is severe and long-lasting. Complications such as iritis are not uncommon. Intermittent pyrexia, night sweats, and secondary anaemia are the rule. The disease often continues for months or years, and in spite of intensive research, neither the cause nor any effective treatment has yet been found.

Hans Reiter was born in 1881 in Leipzig, the son of a manufacturer and owner of a factory. After Reiter had matriculated from the Thomas Gymnasium at the age of 20, he commenced his medical studies in the University of Leipzig, and continued them in Breslau and Tübingen. In 1906 he graduated M.D. Leipzig, and then undertook post-graduate training in bacteriology and hygiene. This prolonged study was exceptionally thorough and highly cosmopolitan. It was calculated to embrace training under the greatest masters in bacteriology in all Europe, and there are but few, if any, who have emulated Reiter in this respect. Commencing with 9 months at the Pasteur Institute, Paris, Reiter then spent a year at the Institute of Hygiene and Pharmacology at Berlin University. He then undertook 2 years' training under Sir Almroth Wright† at St. Mary's Hospital, London. This was followed by 2 years as Assistant and Lecturer at the Institute of Hygiene, Königsberg. In May, 1914, Reiter was elected deputy Head of a special ward at the Institute for Hygiene, Berlin. August of that year found him an assistant doctor in the German army on the



FIG. 1.—Hans Reiter, b. 1881.

Western Front, and in September, while stationed at Chauny, France, he was called upon to care for a number of soldiers suffering from Weil's disease. It was here that he made his first great discovery—he found the causative organism of Weil's‡ disease, the *Leptospira icterohaemorrhagiae*, by inoculating innumerable animals. This was a remarkable achievement, seeing that the causative organism of Weil's disease had been sought unsuccessfully since 1880. Promoted to a higher rank, Reiter was transferred to the Balkan Front. In 1916 a patient was sent to him with severe inflammation of the conjunctivae, the urethra, and a number of joints. Reiter published an account of this disease in the *Deutsche medizinische Wochenschrift* in 1916; soon afterwards others reported similar cases, and it was not long before the syndrome of abacterial urethritis, conjunctivitis, and arthritis became known universally as Reiter's disease.

After World War I, Hans Reiter became eminent in the field of preventive medicine. He became successively Professor of Hygiene at Rostock Uni-

* Received for publication, October 31, 1958. Thanks are due to Messrs. H. K. Lewis and Co. Ltd., London, for permission to reprint this biography from the 3rd edition of "Notable Names in Medicine and Surgery" by Hamilton Bailey and W. J. Bishop, and to Professor Reiter for supplying particulars of his career.

† Sir Almroth Wright, 1861–1947, Professor of Bacteriology, St. Mary's Hospital, London.

‡ Adolph Weil, 1848–1916, Director of the Medical Clinic, Dorpat, Estonia. Developed laryngeal tuberculosis and subsequently practised at various spas.



FIG. 2.—The University of Leipzig.

versity (1919–1923), Chief of a department of the Hygiene Institute in that city (1923–1925), Chief of a department in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Experimental Therapy, Berlin, under Professor August von Wassermann,* Director of the Health Department of Mecklenburg, and finally President of the Health Service in Berlin and Honorary Professor of Hygiene in the University of Berlin. From October, 1933, to 1945 he represented Germany at the International Health Organization in Paris.

One of the innovations Reiter made while occupying the Chair of Hygiene in Rostock was to make special trips with his students to various industrial centres in Germany, where he lectured on social

hygiene. Professor Reiter is a Gold Medallist of the University of Leipzig (1957) and a Robert Koch Medallist, holds the Grand Order of the Red Cross, and is an honorary member of many scientific associations at home and abroad. In later years he has made an intensive study of the illegitimate child and its problems. Professor Reiter now resides at his country home at Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe, Hessen.

The interest and importance of Reiter's disease is exemplified by the fact that many hundreds of papers on this condition have been published in the medical journals of the world. From these, Professor Reiter has himself selected for the *British Journal of Venereal Diseases* nearly 400 references as those he considers to be the most valuable which have appeared up to December 31, 1958.

* August von Wassermann, 1866–1925. Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Experimental Therapeutics, Berlin.

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